

Thomas Jefferson and John Adams: Defining the Role of Government



By Andrew Holmberg

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson lived and worked in a very important period in American History. They came along in a time of transition and helped to shape America into the nation we see today. Jefferson and Adams have philosophies about the role of government in the lives of the citizens that are different and similar. Adams pushed for a stronger central government and Jefferson pushed for states rights along with the decentralization of power. Jefferson believed in the individual man having a role in governing. He had faith that men could govern themselves. Jefferson and Adams were engaged in politics during a time when America was moving from a state under British control, to the Articles of Confederation and finally to the Constitution. This shift was a defining moment for America because the issue of the role of government in the lives of Americans became very important in shaping a national government. These two great men were able to formulate ideas that led to a balance in the government that has carried on until this day.

Thomas Jefferson held many important positions from which he was able to share his ideas with his fellow statesmen. Jefferson began his career in the Virginia House of Burgesses, where he questioned British colonial principles and strongly forced the issue of American citizen's rights. He became the main author of the Declaration of Independence where he put forth his idea of natural rights through self-government (Jefferson).

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with inherent inalienable rights; that among these, are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."
--Declaration of Independence as originally written by Thomas Jefferson, 1776. (ME 1:29, Papers 1:315)

This quote exemplifies the feelings of Thomas Jefferson on the role of government. The government's role is to secure the rights of the people. The government must do everything possible to protect the safety and happiness of the people. A government also must promote morality among its people in order to secure justice. The interest of the government is in the happiness of the governed and nothing more. The happiness of the governors should not be a factor in their decisions. The rulers work for the people. The power in a society rests in the people and the people should exercise those powers as much as possible. The people must exercise these powers so that in fact they govern the governors themselves. This prevents corruption in the government. Jefferson believed that a strong central government would lead to government

intervention in all aspects of American's lives. He saw this as a threat to American's civil liberties, because he felt government intervention would lead to tyranny (Fundamentals.) Jefferson believed in states rights and a moderate central government. He implemented these policies while in office as president in 1800. He felt that a strong central government might abuse power. His accomplishments in this area included lowering internal taxes, cutting military funding and trying to get rid of the public debt (Philosopher President).

John Adams, a lawyer and diplomat from Braintree, Massachusetts, was an advocate of a strong central government for the United States. In 1765, he began to oppose British revenue collection because they used their military to enforce it. During the Second Continental Congress he became a leader for independence. He gave many speeches that advocated the need for independence. He wrote his *Thoughts on Government* in 1776, which laid the groundwork for the colonies to be individually governed and be called states. He was a large supporter of a formal declaration of independence, which helped to achieve one. Adams gained much recognition for his writing called the *Defense of the Constitutions*. The book was about political systems and it leaned toward the bicameral legislative system for the United States (Adams.) Through his speeches and his writings his political philosophy was evident.

Adams' philosophy is made up of three main elements. Adams' view of human nature, his ideas of inequality and his view of government made up his philosophy. Adams' believed that people were not good and decent as was believed by Jefferson. He felt that people were selfish. Adams also denied the idea of equality among people. He felt that nations were divided into two types of people: "gentlemen and simple men." Gentlemen had more knowledge, abilities and education that qualified them to rule the nation. These two ideas laid the groundwork for his philosophy of the role of government. The majority of people were selfish and not fully qualified to rule, so society needed to have a system to keep them in check. The average person could not be given power. Adams didn't believe in tyranny though. He favored a republican government that put a talented aristocracy into power (Padover.) Adams was able to set up a strong central government while he was in power. In 1798 his administration enacted a tax on houses, land and slaves, affecting every property owner in the country. These actions strengthened the national government, which angered many Americans (Jefferson and Adams.) The Adams' administration passed even more controversial legislation than just taxes. The Alien and Sedition Acts angered many Americans because of the way the acts strengthened the national government. The passing of these Acts and what came after is an excellent example of one of the key differences between Jefferson and Adams.

In 1798, Congress passed the Alien and Sedition Acts. The Acts were passed on the brink of a war with France and attempted to strengthen the national government. The Acts made it possible for the national government to deport aliens who were seen as a threat and imprison or fine anyone who put forth material that was considered treasonous. The government could also deport or imprison any alien who was from the nation with which the US was at war. Jefferson was a strong opponent of these Acts. Jefferson along with James Madison secretly drafted a set of resolutions, which were introduced into the Kentucky and Virginia legislatures. Jefferson and Madison felt that a compact among the states created the Constitution and that the people speaking through their state legislatures had the power to decide whether or not the national government's actions were legitimate (The Adams Presidency.)

Jefferson and Adams may have disagreed about the size of a government and the government duties, but they did agree on some issues. In an exchange of letters between Jefferson and Adams, Jefferson wrote: "For I agree with you that there is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents ... there is also an artificial aristocracy, founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents." He went on to talk about how the best form of government is one that puts the natural aristocracy into power. Adams had based his political views on the idea that a talented aristocracy should run the government, but the aristocracy should be chosen by talent and not by birth (Gilreath 127.)

Thomas Jefferson and John Adams had a large effect on the contemporary understanding of American democracy. The two men argued about issues that are still relevant. The issue of "big government" is one of the fundamental disagreements of Adams and Jefferson. Today "big government" is criticized for high taxes, wasting taxpayer's money, an unbalanced budget and supporting too many social programs like welfare and affirmative action. This is an issue that was defined by Jefferson and Adams. During Adams presidency, he would introduce a new tax and then Jefferson would criticize him for it. Jefferson left us with the idea that we should keep the power in the hands of the people to avoid tyranny. The checks and balances system we have in America is a reflection of Jefferson's idea of decentralization of power. He wanted to protect against tyranny and the feeling in America reflects Jefferson's idea. The idea of Adams to have a strong central government has had a larger effect, because of how the national government has grown over time. Adams' ideas of strong military and high taxes to fund a powerful government impacted American ideas as America grew and became the world power that it is today (Mladenka.)

The ideas that Jefferson laid out about civil liberties are ideas that impact our thinking today. After September 11, a debate was brought up about how the government should go about ensuring the safety of the American citizens. Some felt that the increase in the national government's role in American citizen's lives was okay as long as the goal was to provide security. Others felt that this increase in the national government's power would breach our civil liberties. The debate over the USA Patriot Act was over civil liberties. This is the exact same argument that Jefferson and Adams had when the Adams administration passed the Alien and Sedition Acts. The debates that Jefferson and Adams had are certainly debates that America is still having today and our contemporary ideas reflect those of our founding fathers.

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